



Fishermen and women, farmers and trade union representatives staged an angry demonstration in Colombo, complaining that ambitious government development projects are displacing them from their land.

They are particularly opposed to big new tourism schemes.

The government says tourism is a key sector in its post-war development plan.

The protestors roundly criticised the infrastructure projects being built according to what's called the Mahinda Philosophy, named after the Sri Lankan president.

They alleged that in much of the island, land is being taken from its rightful owners in the name of tourism.

Luxury hotels

Herman Kumara of the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement highlighted a group of unspoilt islands off the west coast, where the government is leasing land to foreign consortiums to build 17 luxury hotels.

He says fisherfolk and farmers are losing access to land they have always used.

"They want to build up 5-star hotels, golf courses, seaplane, air taxi services providing, and also using forests and so on for tourism resorts. Which belong to the people. So that's why people are unhappy."

But the government defends its tourism policy.

It is just announced a plan to increase by five times the number of visitors by 2016, raising it to two and a half million a year.

Taking care of tourists

To discover the rich and rare beauties of Sri Lanka, more hotel rooms are needed, says the head of the tourism department, Nalaka Godahewa.

"When a tourist comes to the country, if you look after them, if we make them happy when they go back, they will send maybe 10 tourists more, maybe 20 tourists more, maybe 30 tourists more. So we have to make sure that tourists who come to the country are taken care of."

Tourism is key to this country's future.

The question is whether a balance can be struck between the government's ambitious view of the way forward, and the needs of communities who say their very way of life is threatened.

- BBC sandeshaya